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ABSTRACT

Three stereotypes of male-female behavior as manifested in language were investigated. The stereotypes are: women are more verbose than men, women use more modifiers than men, and women are submissive to men. Eighty students were randomly assigned to one of two conflict resolution conditions--a business situation and an interpersonal situation--and were asked to write conclusions to a dialogue for a situation in which one speaker was male and one female. Some of the findings were that female subjects used more words in writing their scripts, both sexes attributed more words in the scripts to males than to females leading the researchers to speculate that talking in a conversation is a symbol of power, female subjects used more adjectives in their writing than did males, and more questions were attributed to males than to females in the dialogues. (An appendix contains copies of the conflict situation materials.) (MKM)

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Male-Female Language Attributions in the Resolution of Conflict

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Introduction

Spurred by a delicate interplay of social, intellectual, and pragmatic forces, recent language behavior research has been marked by increased attention to male-female differences (Eakins, et al., 1975; Thorne and Henley, 1976; Eakins and Eakins, 1978). From a social vantage point, the impact of the Women's Movement cannot be underestimated as a significant factor in the recognition that language shapes human interaction. From a different emphasis, intellectual investigations have focused on understanding the power of language to define, categorize, and control (Allport, 1954, in Eschholz, et al., 1974) as well as to shape our thought processes (Carroll, 1954). Finally, the pragmatic forces stimulating this research have as their ultimate aim changing the attitudes and behaviors that perpetuate social and economic inequities.

The fact that research on sex differences in language behavior has proved insensitive to the confines of academic disciplines (Thorne and Henley, 1976; Kramer, 1975) coupled with the proliferation of research under the rubric "gender and language" makes it imperative to impose a framework on the research in order to analyze where we've been and where we're going. Given the variety of approaches in research on language and sex, the following category system appears fruitful: (1) studies that investigate how language is used to describe males and females (Description); (2) studies that examine

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the actual language behavior of males and females (Production); (3) studies that focus on differences in language use based on listener sex (Direction); and (4) studies that focus on male-female perceptions of each other's language behavior (Attribution). From a review of representative studies in each category we learn the assumptions underlying the research, questions posed in the investigations, methodological approaches, findings, and questions for future research. And there are many. The study detailed below is designed to answer one of these many questions.

Language Research

The Description Genre

Studies in the description genre propose to answer the following questions: What constitutes sexism in language? To what extent is English sexist? How does a sexist language affect human interaction? Though not designed to study sexism per se, Allport's (1954, in Eschholz, 1974) early research on the central role of language in prejudice provides a backdrop for descriptive research on sex differences in language behavior. He explains that while each individual can be labeled according to a lengthy list of descriptors, the "label of primary potency" determines others' primary response patterns to the person. To use Allport's example, imagine a person who is blind, but at the same time qualified, skilled, and brilliant. If for a prosepctive employer, the label of primary potency is "blind," then the prospective employee is reacted to as "blind" first and as all else only secondarily. Under these circumstances, it is easy to understand the impact this label can have on individuals' interactions, if not on their employment prospects.

Similarly, a person who is knowledgeable, qualified, assertive, and female might carry the label "female" as one of primary potency, and not without discriminatory consequences. Allport's analysis compels us to recognize that the power of labels cannot be underestimated.

Researchers have examined at length just how our everyday language is used to describe men and women. For example, Bosmajian (1972) demonstrates that sexism in the normal use of English is common. He suggests that use of terms such as jury-woman, businessman, mankind, housewife, spinster, and bachelor affect our perceptions and, thereby, our interactions. In their short descriptive article, Miller and Swift (1973) include an analysis of the words masculine, feminine, sissy, buddy, and tomboy, among others with the observation that sexism in language exists for both males and females. Graham (1977) argues that words used to describe men and women do matter. A little time and imagination could easily extend this analysis from other perspectives. From an historical vantage, Schultz (1976) illustrates how words used to describe women are products of "pejoration" in our language. The point is clear.

The dictionary has provided more raw material for descriptive research on sex differences and language. As a result of investigating examples in the Random House Dictionary of the English Language to demonstrate how words can be used in sentences, Gershuny (1974) concludes that a subtle sexism pervades our most basic language reference, the dictionary. Her examples are instructive because they point up a general pervasiveness of sexism in the dictionary's "illustrative sentences." Of 2028 sentences analyzed, 1391 or 68% contained masculine gender words only. A mere 9% used both masculine

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and feminine gender words. In fairness, we must recognize that the task of de-sexing a dictionary is arduous (Graham, 1973).

In recent research, Lakoff (1975) argues that language not only defines but also keeps woman in her rightful place. An historical analysis of the term "lady," suggests Lakoff, gives a perspective on the activities and interests appropriate for "ladies." These include the finer things in life, the arts and related concerns. This domain of acceptable pursuits for ladies reveals the notable absence of activities of the world, those that make significant differences in business, government and economy, the places that matter. Based on these studies and others in the descriptive genre, it is the widely accepted conclusion that our language is sexist.

Research in the description genre is founded on the assumption that sexism in language matters. Practically, researchers' scrutiny of the words we use and how we use them has prodded change in language behavior. However, in assessing the impact of this genre, the criterion is not only change in language behavior; but more importantly, change in behavior (Johnson and Leck, 1975). The potential for new investigations of sexism in English and other languages appear bounded only by researchers' ingenuity.

The Production Genre

While considering the inherent sexism in our language, it is important for the communication researcher to investigate differences in male-female use of language, that is, production. This genre seeks to answer two basic questions: Are there fundamental differences in the way that men and women use language? If so, what is the nature of these differences? An understanding

of these differences has implications for education, business, and human interaction as a whole.

Answers to these basic questions have been sought from a number of perspectives. Fox (1972) found no sex differences in the syntactic and lexical diversity of kindergarten and grade school children. Based on their investigation of free play behavior, Messer and Lewis (1972) report that girls spent longer vocalizing to their mothers than did boys, but unlike the social class differences on this variable, sex differences were not statistically significant. Graves (1973) reports sex differences in children's choices of subjects in "unassigned writing." In research on older subjects, Kutner and Brogan (1974) found that males report more slang terms than females, but the researchers do not provide evidence of differences in employing these terms.

In her investigation of male-female differences in describing pictures, Swacker (1976) found that men were more verbose, used more numerals, used interjections to mark shifts in topic. In contrast, the less verbose women used more conjunctions with shifting topic. These differences alone, claims Swacker, suggest the need to consider the sex variable seriously in future sociolinguistic research.

Most notable in the production genre is the absence of extensive systematic investigation of sex differences in language behavior. For example, a host of situational variables remain to be investigated in terms of sex differences: topic, task, communicative demand level, and anticipation of evaluation, to name a few (Cazden, 1970; Bradac, Konsky, and Elliott, 1976). As a result, further research must precede a comprehensive statement about male-female differences in language use.

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The Direction Genre

The third genre of studies, direction, deals with differential language performance based on characteristics of the listener. The key question for this research is: How is language behavior affected by the sex of the listener?

Cherry (1975) found that preschool teachers talked more and differently to male students and female students. Rubelsky and Hanks (1971) report that fathers talk more to female infants when engaged in "caretaking," but more to male infants at other times.

Research in this area reflects stereotypes about males and females insofar as the language directed to an individual is a function of whether the listener is considered more or less intelligent, a better or poorer listener, loquacious or silent, emotional or logical, and a host of others (Kramer, 1975; Jespersen, 1922). The direction genre in language research is in an early stage of development, but nevertheless offers considerable promise for the study of male-female differences in language behavior.

The Attribution Genre

The description, production, and direction perspectives are complemented by a fourth category of sex-based language research--attribution. An analysis of the language attribution patterns of males and females provides one method for investigating the nature and extent of sex stereotyping that still exists in language behavior. Like other varieties of stereotyping, language stereotypes are forceful in their power to shape perceptions and behavior. In this sense language is a significant factor in perpetuating the stereotype.

Jespersen's 1922 observations on women's language have become a commonplace reference on language and sex (Swacker, 1976). Some fifty years later, Kramer (1975) has found that males and females judge the speech of the sexes to be different. Her subjects considered the speech of males to be "logical, literal, brief, concise, harsh, unfeeling, and in control" (p. 7). Thus we have a rough index of sex stereotypes in language behavior.

However, there is one important observation to be made in discussing the implications of Kramer's study: Subjects' cataloguing of male and female differences does not necessarily entail acting on these stereotypes and might suggest that the subjects have simply learned well dominant sex role stereotypes that "are supposed to exist." What we need then is to examine subjects' language attribution patterns because these can provide the missing attitude-behavior linkage. The study below is designed to provide data regarding the validity of dominant sex stereotypes insofar as they are manifest in the language attribution patterns of males and females.

Hypotheses

Three stereotypes of male-female behavior as manifest in language are investigated in this study: (1) Women are more verbose than men; (2) Women use more modifiers than men; (3) Women are submissive to men. These stereotypes stem from language research, folklinguistics, social role theory, literature, and observation. The following hypotheses are designed to test these stereotypes.

Hypothesis 1: In written resolution of a conflict situation, both sexes will attribute more words to females than to males.

Hypothesis 2: In written response of a conflict situation, both sexes will attribute more adjectives to females than to males.

Hypothesis 3: In written resolution of a conflict situation, both sexes will attribute more questions to females than to males.

Since this study is exploratory, no additional hypotheses are proposed. Regarding situation as an independent variable, the following research question is advanced: Do differences in situation affect stereotypes of male-female behavior as manifest in language?

Method

Subjects

Subjects were 40 males and 40 females in the Basic Communication course at a large midwestern university. They were randomly assigned to one of two conflict resolution conditions. Protocols of all non-white subjects (i.e., black, Hispanic, Asian or Pacific Islander, American Indian or Alaskan Native) were excluded from analysis because language behavior might be affected by race. Analysis of protocols of white subjects eliminate race as a confounding variable.

Conflict Resolution Situations

Two conflict situations were created for use in this study, a business situation and an interpersonal situation. A minimum of two situations was considered desirable because research has demonstrated that differences in "situation" can affect outcomes.

The conflict situations used in this study share certain key elements: (1) Each situation involves one male and one female. (2) Each speaker in a

given situation is initially attributed the same number of words and sentences, because without this control, there is the possibility of introduction of a response set (for example, in terms of mean length of utterance) by the researcher. (3) In each situation, details are purposefully vague to avoid leading the subject to a particular or stereotypic solution to the problem.

The conflict situations require dialogic attributions from the subject. Creation of a dialogue was chosen as the task for two main reasons: (1) The focus is clearly on actual language behavior, not mental processes. (2) Asking subjects to create a dialogue between a male and a female can provide insights regarding how individuals structure a mixed-sex interaction, providing an index of "process" in communication.

Measures

Three dependent measures were used: total number of words, total number of adjectives, and total number of questions. Of the many dependent measures available, these were chosen as representative of dominant stereotypes of male-female language behavior. Two coders counted the total numbers of words, adjectives, and questions in the written scripts.

Procedure

During a regular class meeting, subjects were asked by a male experimenter to participate in the study. They were instructed to read the conflict situation on the front of their packet and to write a script (i.e., dialogue) to resolve the conflict. They were assured that there are no right or wrong answers and asked to focus on the actual conversation they thought would develop between the people in the conflict. After creating the script, subjects

were asked to provide demographic information. (See Appendix.)

Design and Analysis

A 2 X 2 X 2 multivariate analysis of variance was conducted using the MANOVA capability of the Statistical Analysis System. Subject sex and situation are between variables; attributed sex is a within variable. The .05 level of significance was set for all tests.

Results

Multivariate Analysis

1. Pillai's Trace yielded a nonsignificant F-ratio for the three-way interaction: Subject Sex X Attributed Sex X Situation.
2. Pillai's Trace yielded a nonsignificant F-ratio for the following two-way interactions: Subject Sex X Attributed Sex; Subject Sex X Situation; Attributed Sex X Situation.
3. Pillai's Trace, which yields an approximate F-value, yielded main effects for each of the three dependent variables: Subject Sex ($F = 3.38$; $df = 4,73$; $p < 0.0135$), Situation ($F = 13.76$; $df = 4,73$; $p < 0.0001$), and Attributed Sex ($F = 6.71$; $df = 4,73$; $p < 0.0001$).

The obtained multivariate results permitted inspection of the main effects.

Total Words

Univariate F-ratios indicate that Total Words was affected by Subject Sex, ($F = 6.11$; $df = 1,76$; $p < 0.0157$) and by Attributed Sex ($F = 14.63$; $df = 1,76$; $p < 0.0003$). Duncan's Multiple Range Test was used to analyze mean differences for Subject Sex and for Attributed Sex. Results indicate that females used

more words than males in writing their scripts ($\bar{X}$ = 95.46 for females; $\bar{X}$ = 76.33 for males) and that more words were attributed to males ($\bar{X}$ = 95.15) than to females ($\bar{X}$ = 76.65).

Total Adjectives

Univariate F-ratios indicate that Total Adjectives was affected by Subject Sex ($F = 11.24$; $df = 1,76$; $p < 0.0013$) and by Situation ($F = 47.58$; $df = 1,76$; $p < 0.0001$). Duncan's Multiple Range Test was used to analyze mean differences for Subject Sex and Situation. Results indicate that female subjects used more adjectives in writing their dialogues than did male subjects ($\bar{X}$ = 2.90 for females; $\bar{X}$ = 1.81 for males) and that more adjectives were used in the business situation ($\bar{X}$ = 3.47) than in the interpersonal situation ($\bar{X}$ = 1.23).

Total Questions

The univariate F-ratio indicates that Total Questions was affected by Attributed Sex ($F = 4.87$; $df = 1,76$; $p < 0.0304$). Duncan's Multiple Range Test was used to analyze mean differences. Results indicate that more questions were attributed to males ($\bar{X}$ = 1.26) than to females ($\bar{X}$ = 0.85).

Discussion

Hypotheses were proposed based on dominant stereotypes of women as more talkative, flowery, and submissive. These hypotheses were designed to determine the extent to which these stereotypes are actualized in language behavior. Subject Sex, Situation, and Attributed Sex affected subjects' language behavior in five of nine tests involving the three dependent measures.

Both Subject Sex and Attributed Sex affected Total Words. The finding that female subjects used more words in writing their scripts provides support for the stereotype that women are more talkative than men. In using more words, female subjects appear to be living up to society's expectations regarding verbosity. However, this finding becomes more intriguing when considered with the effect of Attributed Sex on Total Words because more words were attributed to males than to females in the scripts. If females are perceived as more talkative, then we would expect subjects to attribute more words to females in the scripts. The reverse was found.

There are at least two competing explanations for this finding. First, women are not more verbose than men, thus rendering the stereotype invalid. A second explanation depends on inferences regarding how subjects perceived the males in the conflict situation and how these perceptions are reflected in their language attributions. Talking more can carry negative evaluations, especially for women. The person who talks more might be perceived as a scatterbrain, short on logic, and careless about thinking things through.

However, talking more can also be a symbol of dominance. Holding the floor in a conversation is one way to maintain control of the situation. Talking more gives a person the potential to express ideas more fully, to introduce more ideas, and to make more suggestions. But more important is the fact that the person who speaks more controls the dialogue nonverbally by occupying more time which is symbolic of dominance. For an analogue we might look to football. The team that controls the ball for more time in the game is generally in a better position (although not always!) to

control the game. Through the dialogues created in this study, both males and females acknowledge the dominance of males in society. It is possible that this perception of dominance is affected by the nature of the situations in this study. Perhaps subjects expected the men to dominate and provide resolutions to conflicts, while they expected the women to devote more attention to understanding, feelings, etc.

Subject Sex and Situation affected Total Adjectives. Female subjects used more adjectives in writing their scripts than did males. This finding is supportive of the stereotype that women's language is more flowery than men's.

Total Adjectives was the only dependent measure affected by Situation with more adjectives used in the business situation where the boss (male) questioned the female worker's productivity. The nature of this business situation, as opposed to the interpersonal situation where the relationship might have been perceived as symmetrical by subjects, could have prompted extensive use of adjectives in order to describe the issue, the worker's productivity, etc. In other words, the low power person in a situation may use more qualifiers to justify his or her position.

It was expected that more questions would be attributed to females in the scripts than to males. Asking questions might be considered an indicator of submissiveness insofar as the person asking acknowledges the judgment and information to be provided in the answer. The questioner makes little personal investment by asking, and therefore this technique might be useful in a high-risk situation. The person asking the question does not have to volunteer any information, structure an argument, or take responsibility for what follows.

in this sense, the questioner submits to the other.

Contrary to prediction, in this study more questions were attributed to males than to females in the dialogue. This finding led to a re-examination of the nature and function of questioning. It has been suggested that asking questions in a dialogue functions as an indicator of dominance because the person who is asking the questions requires a response. From this perspective, questioning becomes a means of regulating the flow in the dialogue. Since more questions were attributed to males, both sexes appeared to perceive men as more controlling, which is generally how society has perceived them.

Some methodological considerations are in order at this point. Asking subjects to create a dialogue is an intuitively appealing way to tap perceptions of how males and females communicate with each other because the subject is required to report what each says to the other in sequence. It is impossible to conduct this orally because such shifting of roles would create a very unnatural situation. Lakoff (1975) has argued that certain aspects of male-female language are not evident in written communication. That is not the case for the three dependent measures used in this study, perhaps because creating a dialogue requires subjects to write as they expect the characters in their dialogues speak.

In both conflict situations, business and interpersonal, the male spoke first. Subjects might have perceived the first speaker--the person who initiates the conversation, explains the source of the conflict, and asks the other person to consider the problem--to be the dominant one. If so, the number of words attributed to males might be a function of perceived power in the situation and not sex role. However, it is important to note that

further research is needed to substantiate this alternative explanation.

Conclusion

Separately and in conjunction, the results of this study are intriguing. Future research varying situation and investigating other dependent measures will help us better understand the extent to which sex role stereotypes are manifest in our language behavior.

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APPENDIX

Conflict Situation I: Business

Dear Participant:

From time to time all of us are involved in conflict situations, that is, situations in which there are competing or mutually exclusive goals. In a few minutes you will be asked to write a script to resolve a conflict situation. We are interested in what you think each party would actually say in the process of resolving the conflict. In other words, we are interested in conflict resolving communication.

Try to picture the situation that you will read. Imagine what Person A and Person B would say. In the script that you write, have Person A and Person B focus on the relevant issues and have them resolve the conflict by communicating. We are asking you to write out the conversation that you think would develop between the two people.

Read the situation below and get ready to write the script. Each time you write a portion of the script, be sure to indicate who is speaking. For example, as the situation below is progressing, Mr. Smith speaks next. As you write the script of the dialogue, concentrate on the actual conversation that you think would develop between the people.

Conflict Situation

Mr. John Smith: Lately I've noticed that we've got a productivity problem. This department isn't finishing projects on time and it's mainly because you aren't keeping up with the schedule we agreed on.

Miss Alice Jones: I've been trying, but it seems that I can't work any faster and still turn out quality work. I don't want to change the work rate we have now.

Mr. S: . . . . . .

Miss J: . . . . . .

etc.

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Conflict Situation 2: Interpersonal

Dear Participant:

From time to time all of us are involved in conflict situations, that is situations in which there are competing or mutually exclusive goals. In a few minutes you will be asked to write a script to resolve a conflict situation. We are interested in what you think each party would actually say in the process of resolving the conflict. In other words, we are interested in conflict resolving communication.

Try to picture the situation that you will read. Imagine what Person A and Person B would say. In the script that you write, have Person A and Person B focus on the relevant issues and have them resolve the conflict by communicating. We are asking you to write out the conversation that you think would develop between the two people.

Read the situation below and get ready to write the script. Each time you write a portion of the script, be sure to indicate who is speaking. For example, as the situation below is progressing, Ralph speaks next. As you write the script of the dialogue, concentrate on the actual conversation that you think would develop between the people.

Conflict Situation

Ralph: Lately I've realized that we've got a financial problem. We aren't saving any money each month, and it's mainly because you aren't keeping to the terms we agreed on.

Marcia: I've been trying, but it seems that I can't stay within those terms and still live the way that I want to. I don't want to change our lifestyle.

R: . . . . . .

M: . . . . . .

R: . . . . . .

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Now we would like to know a few things about you . . .

1. Age _____

2. Marital Status

_____ single

_____ married

_____ divorced

_____ separated

_____ widow or widower

2. Sex: male _____ female _____

4. Group Identity data

_____ White (non-Hispanic)

_____ black (non-Hispanic)

_____ Hispanic

_____ Asian or Pacific Islander

_____ American Indian or Alaskan Native

5. Years of Education _____

Finally, we would like to have some direct feedback from you about the conflict situation you resolved? Do you consider the situation a realistic one? Why or why not?

Are you pleased with the conversation you wrote? Why or why not?

Thank you again for your cooperation.

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